

VINCENT O'SULLIVAN: Review of Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems 1954-1982

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BOOKS

Sometimes Gladness, Collected Poems 1954 -1982, by Bruce Dawe. Longman Cheshire, 1983, 245 pages.

It is a disturbing thing for some commentators on Bruce Dawe that he happens to be so popular, as though ideally a poet's worth is in inverse proportion to the number of his readers. His *Collected Poems* being listed recently as the only volume of verse among the ten best Australian books of the last decade will certainly further dint his reputation with some of his "professional" (i.e. paid to read poetry) critics. Dawe's accessibility in itself has been a black mark against him. After all, doesn't he have the kind of gift that can seem so engaging to people who hardly ever read a line of poetry? Can't just about any audience respond to these poems, pick up what his values are, listen to a voice that is so familiar they are quite at home with it, yet a voice that is so finely and subtly turned that they wait for the quirks, the turns, the wit that constantly surprises them? The trouble seems to be that Dawe can do that at the same time as many people who do read poetry are just as engaged. The puzzle for some then, and the delight for others, is that his poems can be as available as a pop lyric or a racing commentary, and also offer the emotional breadth, the resonances of image and rhythm, that we associate often with a different kind of poetry. At his best, Dawe might bring to mind Pablo Neruda, that cross-hatching of public stance with intricate personal response, and an exuberance of imagery drawing both together. This revised edition of his poems allows Dawe to come at one more "naturally", I think, than the earlier edition which arranged the poems according to themes. It does far more justice to the poet to read him year by year, to follow the maturity and assurance as each poem is put down, than to be editorially directed to designated areas.

Dawe has left us in no doubt about the poetry he admires, and the kind he would like to write. It is a poetry that embraces "the public world in which we have a stake as citizens like everyone else and that private world where we confront the mystery of our individual personalities." His list of poetic godfathers declares his own intentions merely by being named: Edgar Lee Masters, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, John Crowe Ransome. The form that has become Dawe's particular hallmark is the one that sets his squarely in that line of succession. "The monologue form itself is of course the paradigm of poetry seeking to deal with both the poet's personal feelings and the potential public audience external to those." (1) Dawe has opted for an ancestry that commits him to the shared tides and fluctuations of immediate social life, rather than to the kind of writing where attention is directed to the poet's *difference*, to his stand *vis-a-vis* more eclectic or more purely literary loyalties. One could say that Dawe has sided with Modernism's stay-at-home sibling, at a time when many Australian poets have gone after varieties of "Internationalism". One *could*. But it would be a fairly limited point one made, an observation mainly about stanzaic preferences and metrical options. Either way, it would imply nothing about quality, although it does propose a good deal about purpose.

That word "purpose" takes one to the centre of the critical debate which is now defining the Humanities. At least within academe, writing is judged less against "experience", that insistent continuum we all know because our senses don't have anywhere else to exist, and more against not simply other books, and other poems, but other theories about other books and other poems. (Criticism's refractory mirrors begin to remind one of sitting in a barber's shop as a boy, the disembodied head springing in crops along receding rows.) It is an argument finally about the primacy of pattern over denotation. Everything in Dawe comes down on the side of the world we're intractably bound to. Literature may do all kinds of other things as well, but in his

view it has to do this- it has to speak for and about a man's sense of communal being. Eliot's definition of culture as respect for the dead, concern for the living, solicitude for the unborn,(2) is never far from mind as one reads Dawe. It means that in one direction it leads to "The Wholly Innocent", that moving poem on abortion, whose final argument is that community has been denied as much as individual life "This was my only life-line: trust." Or it will bring us in "Homecoming" to a level of elegy that is compelling and rare. Notice in that poem the importance and repetitive force of "home", the word that insists again how the communal is at the centre of any human act. It means that whatever we claim for ourselves, has validity because we make those same claims for others. It provides the ground from which Dawe demands, on behalf of the self-deceivers and the no-hopers, that we respect the "frail personal herb of self-deception" which may, after all, be "the Tierra del Fuego which distinguishes/ Dignity's southern limits". ("The Flashing of Badges") Their feeling for the "passionate, suffering, dumb characters locked into their fates" was what had drawn him first to the poetry of Robinson and Masters. And as it struck him twenty years ago, "It seems incredible to me that so few genuine poems reflect directly or indirectly an awareness of the social problems of our country. (3)

Dawe's perceptions are sharp, and enormously good-humoured, when he writes of those small-time failings that are never going to make the bill-boards, or the unspectacular domestic clutter of barbecues, in-laws, children, neighbours, debts, lovers. He knows how "the happiness of the motorist/Depends upon pedestrians envious of their wheels" ("Then"), and about those "Little Blokes" "badly needing with desperate vagueness/to feel bigger somewhere, sometime." He's an expert at spotting what Thoreau called "the quiet desperation" in so many lives ("Any Shorter and I'd Have Missed It Altogether", "The Family Man"), although his watching is undershot with a constant *caritas*. And when he is read as fully as this collection allows, it is his grasp on the detail as well as the broader drift of a community that strikes one; his deftness in drawing out the filaments of an act ("The Last of Games") or a person ("Woodeye") or some intuition ("Take to the Hills") so that they are then worked into a shared social web, and become part of "the same green transitory world we also knew." ("Happiness is the Art of Being Broken")

Behind his knack for picking up the small lies of the bludger, the self-deceptions of ordinary life, the greater lies of the politician, there is always the humanism that carries with it certain linguistic and aesthetic assumptions. It comes to how best to get across, in full seriousness but with least solemnity,

*as much as any man can offer,
time, pain, love, hate, anger, war, death,
laughter, fever.
("Homo Suburbiensis")*

For a poet of Dawe's convictions, there is no alternative to a language that is common property, and an imagery whose terms have to satisfy him as a poet, but work back to the shared perceptions, as well as the shared idioms, of the man next door.

*In season the currawongs in the camphor-laurels
cry like tin-shears.
(The jacarandas hang their sheets
of blue water in mid-air.)*

The examples come in their dozens. The *outré*, the ostentatious, the introspective, the quick pant after the modish, are not things that interest Dawe. His business is to diminish, not increase, the disparity between poetry and "the common man". (A phrase I am certain Dawe himself would never use.) There is no way of unravelling his aesthetic intention from a political one. Which is why Dawe's is the most *democratic* voice in Australian poetry, the voice that is closest in practice as well as aspiration to what his country rests on. And perhaps the most democratic thing that he does is to put himself on the line in every statement he makes. He knows as well as any other poet what irony offers, or how persona can at times let one off the hook. But the moral tendency of any Dawe poem can be taken as the author's conviction apart from that particular

expression of it. That is not a particularly fashionable stance. It excludes certain kinds of poetry, and certain subtleties. There is no guarantee - as there isn't with any kind of writing - that it will always come off. There are times when the reader feels hectored for the sake of a good cause ("The Not-So-Good Earth"), or when a moral line doesn't find an appropriate clarity ("The Raped Girl's Father"). But the charge of condenscension, so justly levelled at some writers with a soft-spot for "the common voice", won't stick if brought against Dawe. He does not need to change register or taste or views to speak "as one of the people", because he knows that on his own terms it is only by being one of them, that he speaks at all. He is much closer to a tribal voice than to "the informed sympathetic observer."

Whenever I read Dawe I find that at some point I am thinking of Patrick White as well. At least that Patrick White who excoriates suburbia, who hates its unimaginativeness and its plaster ornaments and its women's tasteless hats and the heavy telephone breathing. Occasionally, of course, White concedes a suppressed housewife who may see that a dancing half-wit has the mandala in his grasp, while everyone else in the street has only the keys to the new Falcon. Marvellous as White is on so much else, it is Dawe who strikes me as having the better claim on Sarsaparilla. Fulmination against vulgarity and petty tragedy tends to lose its edge if you're close enough to look into their eyes. Those "characters" in so many of the poems, Shagger's praying mum, the fat lady at tennis taken seriously when she is dead, the boy savouring police attention because at least *someone* notices him, are arguments against ever writing anyone off. Even the famous satirical pieces like "Lifecycle" or "The Copy-writer's Dream" are not dismissive of their targets. They are not poems of anger so much as laments at waste. And it is only by speaking of such limitations wittily, with such idiomatic *élan*, that even the VFL fanatic, or the glib salesman, might see without rancour the point of the poems. On the larger screen of war - the Vietnam poems ask for a discussion of their own Dawe of course hones a different blade. He is then in company with Swift, "to make vice and folly bleed".

I suppose the strongest reservations mounted against Dawe came from his most impressive adversary. James McAuley was irritated by this assumption of the "tribal voice", although he did not call it that. He pointed out what it is that immediately draws us to Dawe's verse, "its quick eye for the circumstances of our experiences: the usual environments, the trivia, the accidental litter, in and through which our lives get a certain look and feel." But as he then explained, "Whenever anyone sets up to be a satirist of human wickedness and folly, we need to be convinced that the satirist's own convictions are realistic, capable of true accounts of human situations'.(4) That was written seventeen years ago. Well over half the poems in *Sometimes Gladness*, and most of the strongest, have been written since. McAuley's demands quite properly stand, but I believe his reservations would have been dissipated. Dawe can now point to a body of work bearing witness to his conviction that you ought not belong to a society, and write as though it's not there. Of course some fine poets have claimed that you can. But from Dawe's viewpoint that would introduce what perhaps one might call "the Wank Factor", which is another matter entirely. In *his* book, poetry isn't something you do with the blinds drawn.

A poet's job, as Dawe insisted when he claimed that balance between public and private, is to call things by their right names, to elicit appropriate responses. It is the argument of Aristotle's *Poetics*, if you like, spelled out for Toowoomba. His is an approach that refuses to call a demarcation dispute between poetry, religion, political conviction. The three should bring one to the same point, to staking a claim, as the poet does at the end of his Introduction to the *Collected Poems*, for "individuality... always under attack somewhere in the world, and always somewhere (thank God) defended."

I have referred earlier to Neruda. Here's Neruda again to end off with, in a definition that would cover Dawe from among Australian poets, but how many else? "... the poet of the modern age accepts the investiture earned in the street, among the masses. Today's social poet is still a member of the earliest order of priests." (5)

Notes

1. "Public Voices and Private Feeling", *The American Model*, edited Joan Kirby, 1982, 162, 169.
2. T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, 1948.

3. "Recent Trends in Australian Poetry", a paper given at the Adelaide Festival in 1964. Quoted in *Times and Seasons, an Introduction to Bruce Dawe*, edited Basil Shaw, 1974, 65.
4. James McAuley, Review of *An Eye for a Tooth*, *Twentieth Century*, September 1968, 85.
5. Pablo Neruda, "Poetry is an Occupation", the penultimate chapter *Memoirs*, translated by Hardie St. Martin, 1977.

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